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ABSTRACT

An overview of significant research studies, bibliographies, historical reviews, definitions, and commentaries on speed reading during the past 60 years is presented in this paper. The first part of the paper considers the concept and definitions of speed reading, and summarizes research from the 1940s and 1950s--including discussion of eye movement studies and the flexibility of reading rates. The paper then discusses the Evelyn Wood speed reading technique and the resulting criticism of it, including George D. Spache's article identifying its weaknesses. Next, the paper explores studies conducted in the 1960s concerning the relationship between reading rate and and comprehension, factors that might influence reading speed, and the effect of speed reading on studying. The paper continues with a list of selected studies from the 1970s reflecting moderate expectations from speed reading, discusses the continuing controversy, and ends with a summary that points out the opportunity to learn from past research. (EL)

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Dimensions of Speed Reading:

A Review of Research Literature

by

Mark. E. Thompson

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present the most significant research studies, bibliographies, historical reviews, definitions, and commentaries on speed reading during the past 60 years. Special emphasis is given to the 1960s. Related speed reading concerns such as: comprehension, flexibility, skimming and scanning, and various external factors affecting rate of reading are given attention. Eye movement research studies are also mentioned. This information is developed in a chronological presentation. Topics within the paper, after introductory remarks, are: a concept of speed reading, speed reading research, and a summary. Brief comments regarding quality and appropriateness are selectively offered.

DIMENSIONS OF SPEED READING:

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

by

Mark E. Thompson

In the 1920s Alfred North Whitehead commented on two aspects of Reason, the Reason of Plato and the Reason of Ulysses. "The one shares Reason with the Gods, the other shares it with foxes."[1] The Reason of Plato seeks complete understanding, and the Reason of Ulysses seeks an immediate method of action.[2]

Speed and efficiency frequently become substitutes for thoughtful approaches and may force the educational process into narrow but dynamic spheres, Reason seeking immediate action. The twentieth century has advanced the world-machine concept from the Age of Reason (1650-1800) by using technical advances that often utilized speed to measure efficiency.[3]

Using machines to increase speed created vigorous, but sometimes dangerous processes. Concepts of speed and efficiency are involved with human behavior. William James is described as being "...obsessed with the problem of 'the energies of men' -- the thoroughly American problem of how to get the most out of yourself.[4]

Early in the twentieth century quality of life was associated with the potential of machines, and speed became an important by-product. But there were some unpredictable problems. On April 15, 1912 the Titanic, thought to be unsinkable, sank at 2:20 A.M. after

hitting an iceberg. One thousand five hundred three people were killed. The Titanic, on her maiden voyage, was probably trying to set a speed record across the Atlantic. Seven warnings of icebergs were received by the Titanic, but the ship continued at full speed, 22.5 knots.[5]

Technology speeds mechanical process and indirectly it speeds human activity. We have developed numerous techniques to speed up our life style. In 1903 the Wright brothers flew their crude airplane, and 66 years later two Americans, Neil A. Armstrong and Edwin E. Aldrin, Jr., landed on the moon. In 1913 Henry Ford built the first automobile assembly line at Highland Park, Michigan, and today there are more than 82 million cars and trucks being used in the United States.[6]

While speed may be valued in some quarters, it is not a useful practice for many professionals; sculptors, painters, writers, and many other crafts people as well as scholars do not generally utilize speed techniques to accomplish their work. Speed may also be analyzed as a distinctive regional phenomenon. People living in New York City probably live a faster life style than those in Athens, Georgia, but there is no evidence that New York City residents are wiser, smarter, or more humane than residents of Athens, Georgia.

The concept of speed seems to be valued and utilized in many specialized areas, but its impact on humans, particularly through technology, has a dominant effect on behavior. Today many Americans move about decisively faster than their parents or grandparents, but there are definite physiological limits for humans.

In one significant area speed has put our entire civilization literally on the brink of disaster. We have rushed to obtain thousands of sophisticated nuclear weapons with exceptionally fast delivery systems, so it is now possible to have a nuclear war from start to finish in less than an hour. Our potential speed and ability to destroy nearly everything on the planet is quite appalling. Tom Lehrer's poem, "So Long, Mom," comments on the speed of nuclear war with biting verse.

Little Johnny Jones
He was a U.S. pilot,
And no shrinking vi'let
Was he.
He was mighty proud
When World War Three
Was declared,
He wasn't scared,
No siree!
And this is what he said on
His way to Armageddon:

So long, Mom,
I'm off to drop the bomb,
So don't wait up for me.
But though I may roam,
I'll come back to my home,
Although it may be
A pile of debris
Remember, mommy,
I'm off to get a Commie,
So send me a salami,
And try to smile somehow.

I'll look for you
When the war is over,
An hour and a half from now.[7]

Speed reading does not present such an ominous threat to life, but there is considerable friction concerning proper interpretations, functions, and applications. Unusual professional attention and vigorous debate have developed as a result of many excited claims for speed reading.

A Concept of Speed Reading

The term "speed reading" is a modern concept that became quite popular during the 1960s, although it existed in professional literature since the early 1900s. Allen Berger said the lack of precise terminology is the source of much confusion on this topic.[8] In something of an understatement he also said, "Speed reading, or increasing reading rate, is a rather sensitive topic."[9]

Miles A. Tinker, a prominent researcher in reading and typography, said the only justifiable or valid definition of speed reading is speed of comprehension.[10] George D. Spache defines reading as the act of reading most of the words on the page, and he uses that definition as a frame of reference.[11] Stanford E. Taylor suggests use of words dealt with per minute, W.D.P.M., be used to define speed reading.[12] Walter Pauk observed that people who deal in selling thousands of words per minute rate would do the field of reading a favor by coining another word for reading because what they are doing is not reading in the traditional sense.[13] Brenda Golembesky Smith says confusion with the definition of speed reading occurs when skimming and scanning are used synonymously with reading most words on a page.[14]

Speed reading is sometimes mixed with other definitions such as: rapid reading, accelerated reading, flexible reading, and remedial reading when emphasis is given to skimming and scanning. As a modern concept, speed reading started to work its way into professional literature in a dynamic way 25 years ago, and there is still some confusion about definitions.

Although college reading programs have been offered for at least four decades, speed reading is a relatively new concept.[15] As a matter of fact, many college reading programs have not attempted to get involved with notions of speed reading.[16] However, flexibility in knowing when to read rapidly is considered to be an important trait in most reading programs.[17] Anthony V. Manzo claims that rapid reading classes with some attention to study skills is the oldest and most traditional form of college reading instruction.[18]

In the early part of this century there were no standardized reading tests of any kind. The first one was published in 1915. There was concentration on silent reading, comprehension, and little emphasis on speed.[19] In 1921 J. A. O'Brien published a volume titled Silent Reading, with Special Reference to Speed.[20] This reading book was one of the first to mention speed, but it placed emphasis on silent reading. To check speed, students read orally in class, and the number of lines read per minute were counted. Reading speed may have developed as an aspect of silent reading.[21]

In the 1930s some studies were conducted to determine who reads faster, males or females. Berman and Bird published a study in 1933 based on 463 females and 327 males, all sophomore psychology students. They determined females to be reading about 20 words per minute faster than males. Furthermore, they said females have a general language superiority that is manifested from infancy to adult life.[22]

Allen Berger has an excellent annotated bibliography on

speed reading that starts in the 1930s.[23] This work was published in 1970 and has approximately 150 references (journals and books) to speed reading between 1930-1970. These references are grouped in ten categories: tachistoscopic and controlled pacing, paperback scanning, retention of gains, flexibility, perception, processing information, studying, conditioning, sex differences, and measurement.[24]

Speed Reading Research

Research studies on speed reading were not abundant in professional literature until the 1960s. Few research studies were being reported in the 1940s due to wartime demands on scientific talent. Tachistoscopes were used in World War II to train military personnel to recognize airplane silhouttes more rapidly.[25] Allen Berger has five interesting studies from the 1940s in his annotated bibliography:[26]

1) E. B. Cason's "Mechanical Methods for Increasing the Speed of Reading" appeared in 1943, and no significant differences in reading results were found using various mechanical methods to increase speed.[27]

2) J. B. Stroud and M. Henderson published "Rate of Reading and Learning by Reading" in 1943. They concluded that reading rate and comprehension varies with conditions of reading imposed and with the method of measurement employed.[28]

3) Irving H. Anderson and Cameron W. Meredith published "The Reading of Projected Books with Special References to Rate and Visual Fatigue" in 1948. They found reading a book (C. S. Forester's Captain Horatio Hornblower) was 12 percent faster than reading the projected version; in both ways, the fastest reading was toward the end of the alloted two-hour period.[29]

4) Miles A. Tinker published "Cumulative Effect of Marginal Conditions Upon Rate of Perception in Reading" in 1948. He found speed of perception was retarded 10.4 percent when these precise conditions prevailed: reading eight point type, italic type form, under three footcandles for one-three quarter minutes. Measuring instrument was Tinker's Speed of Reading Test.[30]

5) Miles A. Tinker and Donald G. Patterson published "Speed of Reading Nine Point Type in Relation to Line Width and Leading" in 1949. They found optimal rate of reading occurs with line widths of 14 to 30 picas with one to four points leading.[31]

One prominent dimension of speed reading research that sometimes gets little attention is eye movement studies. Miles A. Tinker of the University of Minnesota conducted some excellent studies on speed reading capability while doing eye movement research. Tinker also produced some scholarly literature reviews

on eye movement research in this country that can be considered definitive works. All of the important eye movement research in the United States between 1900 and 1945 is reviewed by Tinker in two articles: "Eye Movements in Reading" (Journal of Educational Research, 1936) and "The Study of Eye Movements In Reading" (Psychological Bulletin, 1946).[32]

In 1958 Tinker published "Recent Studies of Eye Movements In Reading" (Psychological Bulletin) which covered January 1945 to October 1957.[33] This is an excellent review of the literature on eye movement research as it applies to reading. The explanations of technical detail are quite extraordinary. Tinker organized this literature into five categories: techniques of measurement, analysis of the reading process, training to improve eye movements, typography and eye movements, and eye movements and fatigue. Within the category of "analysis of the reading process" Tinker found that saccadic eye movements, those employed in reading, appear to be remarkably constant in speed.[34] After providing a detailed technical explanation, Tinker suggests that any reading rate over approximately 800 words per minute (W.P.M.) can only mean the reader is skimming rather than reading all the material.[35] He bluntly said, "Any claims by advertised reading improvement programs that one can learn to read at 1500 to 3000 or more W.P.M. can only be false."[36] Toward the end of this article Tinker becomes a bit pessimistic. He concludes by stating, "The future study of eye movements in reading does not appear to be too promising."[37] However, at this time (1958) eye

movement research was about to become involved in a highly controversial speed reading debate.

A British article by Ray Williams claims a French oculist named Javal found that individuals read in a series of pauses and jerks (saccadic movements).[38] This finding by Javal was accomplished in 1879.[39] The pauses are known as fixations, and reading only takes place during fixations.

Tinker found that six to eight percent of most reading time is devoted to eye movements; the rest (92-94%) is spent on pauses.[40] During a pause the reader can see words clearly but must take time for perception and thinking. Pause duration alone has poor validity as a measure of reading proficiency, but when combined with fixation frequency a perception time can be calculated.[41] According to Tinker, perception time is a fairly valid measure of speed reading proficiency.[42]

Mechanical devices such as tachistoscopes, pacers, and films have attempted to improve reading speed by lowering the number of fixatations.[43] Williams stated that on average, individuals make between three and five fixations per second. "The average duration of fixation is about 0.25 of a second, irrespective of the reader's speed or the type of material.[44] Williams also states, "The efficient reader's regressions account for less than 10% of his total fixations, whereas the inefficient reader's regression rate may be as high as 40%."[45] Fixations made in reverse direction are known as regressions.

One significant point resulting from eye movement research

is the identification of a physiological upper limit to usable eye span, usually regarded as 1.5 inches of average print size.[46] When assessing claims of mechanical devices to increase reading speed, it is important to understand this physiological limit.[47] Ray Williams presents research findings from Berger, Karlin, and Manolakes that questions the usefulness of mechanical devices.[48] He believes reading skills improvement will be low and comprehension questionable when using ad hoc courses that set out to improve reading speed by means of mechanical devices.[49]

In this country, George D. Spache and Stanford E. Taylor, two distinguished reading specialists, became interested in eye movement photography in the 1950s, and they had considerable impact in helping to analyze extravagant speed reading claims of the 1960s. Luther C. Gilbert, another distinguished eye movement researcher, was also publishing in the 1950s.[50]

Spache found there is a tendency to revert to the usual pattern of eye movements when emphasis is placed on comprehension. When reading rate is stressed with emphasis to read fast, the reading pattern changes, and there is significant loss of comprehension.[51] Spache "...suggests that reading under rate pressure is apparently an abnormal, less efficient process in most instances."[52]

Stanford E. Taylor found that average reading rate of students increases from about 80 W.P.M. in the first grade to about 280 W.P.M. in college.[53] David J. Yarington said that most adults in our country, including college graduates, read at a rate around 250 W.P.M. "Most of us tend to read everything at

the same rates," says Yarington.[54] Walter Pauk with his straightforward, jaunty style put it this way: "Most students read the back of the cereal box at the breakfast table with the same rapt attention that they read their physics textbooks."[55]

In a recent study (1983) Ronald P. Carver presents evidence from 333 subjects (grades four through college) to support the theory that individuals typically read at a constant rate rather than adjusting their rate to the difficulty level of the material. Carver found that reading rate tended to be constant for each reading ability level when estimates of rate were corrected for differences in word length.[56]

Martha J. Maxwell's fine article on skimming and scanning (1973) contains a reference to Nason and MacDonald's study of over 6,000 students.[57] Ninety percent of these students failed to vary their reading rate despite instructions to read for different purposes and despite variation in the difficulty level (style and content).[58] Nason and MacDonald conclude that reading rate appears to be habitual and invariant.[59] In another article on skimming, Maxwell cites research studies from Ulric Neisser's volume, Cognitive Psychology (1967), indicating the maximum scanning rate for words when meaning must be taken into account is 300 W.P.M.[60] Neisser states that, "...high speed reading is as impossible in theory as it is common in practice."[61]

In the 1950s there was considerable attention devoted to flexibility of reading rate. Leonard S. Braam and William D. Sheldon published Developing Efficient Reading in 1959, a volume devoted to good study habits.[62] They give emphasis to reading

flexibility over speed for the sake of speed. George D. Spache and Paul C. Berg published The Art of Efficient Reading in 1955.[63] They have a section on rapid reading that only covers skimming and scanning. Spache and Berg treat skimming and scanning as particular techniques that help with reading. They do not define skimming and scanning as reading.[64] Phil L. Nacke has an excellent article (1970) on flexible reading that exposes some representative studies from the 1950s:[65]

1) William D. Sheldon and Lawrence W. Carillo. "The Flexibility of Reading Rate," Journal of Educational Psychology, May 1952.[66]

2) Charles T. Letson. "The Relative Influence of Materials and Purpose on Reading Rates," Journal of Educational Research, February 1959.[67]

3) Leonard S. Braam and William D. Sheldon. Developing Efficient Reading. Oxford University Press, 1959.[68]

4) Charles T. Letson. "Building An Informal Flexibility Test," Education, May 1960.[69]

Nacke offers three primary factors that generally affect reading speed:

1) Reader's purpose (internal and external).

2) Level of difficulty of material (terminology and level of ideation).

3) Degree of familiarity or prior knowledge of the subject matter.[70]

Prior to the 1960s the approach to speed reading or rapid reading (a term more acceptable to serious researchers) seemed to be cautious and on the conservative side. Researchers such as Miles Tinker, George Spache, and Sanford Taylor were quite aware of the eye's physiological limits when reading. Their research findings were studied by many reading professionals, and enthusiastic claims announcing techniques for reading beyond psysiological limits were not especially bothersome. This placid environment changed abruptly starting in 1960.

On August 22, 1960, Time magazine devoted little more than one column to the new Reading Dynamics Institute in Washington, D.C. founded by Evelyn Nielsen Wood.[71] Wood is described as slim, earnest, 51 years old, and interested in speed reading for the past 15 years. Her speech teacher at the University of Utah, when she was working on her masters, impressed her with an alleged untrained reading speed of 6,000 W.P.M.[72] Wood said, "Speed is not most important, but only through speed do you get good comprehension."[73]

Her new method to increase speed and reduce regression is explained this way: students learn the "whirlaway motion," a series of circular sweeps with their fingers going down the middle of the page. The students learn to look down the center of the page as they read. They read vertically from top to bottom. As a result of Wood's technique, Time reported that one

pert college girl read a sociology text book at the rate of 14,000 W.P.M. A Wilmington librarian claimed 20,000 W.P.M. using Wood's technique.[74] Dr. Zhivago can be read in one hour using Wood's methods. "You don't see the words as words," says Wood. "The story rolls into you. You get the total impact."[75] Senator Herman Talmadge from Georgia called his own improvement, using Wood's techiques, "fantastic."[76] Senator Talmadge also said it would be worth a million dollar appropriation to set up the Wood system in all of Georgia's schools. A fascinated General Electric engineer predicted, "A storm will come up when this breaks."[77]

Indeed storms of various kinds did come up. Time's national publicity of Evelyn Wood's technique with associated claims of being able to read thousands of words per minute was the symbolic start of speed reading mania in this country. Two months later (October, 1960) the Wilson Library Bulletin[78] published a mocking rebuttal: "We have a sneaking atavistic urge to see a Wood student skidding to a halt in a page of Henry James of the third period, or stalled dead in Finnegan's Wake.[79]

In the November, 1960, issue of The Reading Teacher, Evelyn Wood published, "A Breakthrough in Reading."[80] This article is a discursive review of her interest in speed reading. In the last paragraph she makes reference to standardized comprehension tests and her reading techniques. She said her results from standardized tests are high, so high that more adequate kinds of testing must be provided. "Otherwise too many students who read very fast and accurately push against the ceilings of the test."[81]

Fourteen months later (January, 1962) George D. Spache published "Is This a Breakthrough in Reading?" in The Reading Teacher.[82] This article is one of the most frequently cited references on speed reading within the professional literature.* Spache said in reference to Evelyn Wood's November, 1960, "breakthrough" article, "This article is written to explore the scientific possibilities of such a breakthrough."[83] Spache indicated it is physiologically impossible to read faster than 800 to 900 W.P.M., and he provides data from eye movement research.[84] Spache presents a carefully written, concise, scholarly summary to identify the weaknesses of Wood's speed reading technique. This brief article might be considered a classic.

In November, 1962, Lester R. Wheeler and Viola D. Wheeler published "A New Era in Reading" in The Reading Teacher.[85] They said speed reading institutes, schools, classes, and gadgets are mushrooming to meet popular demands for better and faster reading. However, they expressed concern that, "Schools of Education are not training teachers how to cope with the new concepts required for space-age reading."[86]

President John F. Kennedy was inaugurated January 17, 1961, and influenced the country with his dynamic, engaging personality.[87] He was reported to be able to skim through newspapers and books quite rapidly. His youthful, energetic approach to problems helped

*Stanford E. Taylor's "An Evaluation of Forty-One Trainees Who Had Recently Completed the 'Reading Dynamics' Program" (Eleventh Yearbook Of The National Reading Association, 1962) is a close second to Spache. Taylor and Spache are sharp critics of Evelyn Wood's methods.

to set a national tone for expediency. Speed reading along with skimming and scanning techniques seemed to be quite appropriate for the decade of the '60s.

The 1962 National Reading Conference had "Problems of Reading Speed and Comprehension," as one of their primary topics.[88] Earl F. Rankin, Jr., presented a paper to this conference titled "The Relationship Between Reading Rate and Comprehension."[89] After reviewing disagreements regarding the relationship between speed and comprehension, Rankin narrows his focus to problems of testing procedures. He concludes by saying, "When the material is more difficult, when more critical thought processes are involved, and when the reader's purpose is more exacting, the relationship between reading rate and comprehension is minimal."[90] Charles T. Letson addressed the conference on the topic of "The Future of Rapid Reading" and said, "The introduction of speed as a factor in reading ability has created a revolution in the field of reading."[91]

Numerous researchers quickly turned their attention to factors that might influence reading speed. Alton L. Raygor, David M. Wark, and Ann Dell Warren published "Operant Conditioning of Reading Rate: The Effect of a Secondary Reinforcer" in 1966 and found significant gains in reading rate with the use of reinforcement from green lights.[92] Others such as Martha J. Maxwell focused attention on appropriate skimming and scanning techniques that might be beneficial to students.[93]

One of the most comprehensive and interesting articles on speed reading during the 1960s was written by Allen Berger and

presented to the International Reading Association in 1968.[94] This article is titled "Speed Reading: Is the Present Emphasis Desirable?" Berger notes with some uneasiness that Evelyn Wood Reading Institutes are 200 strong located in 70 cities. Many others were also being attracted to the speed reading business. The April 8, 1968, issue of The National Observer had an ad for the Read-Ability System.[95] To purchase a franchise $25,000 is needed. "...the executive consultant and program director of the Read-Ability System is Joyce Brothers, described in the advertisement as:'author, columnist, radio broadcaster, television personality, educator.'"[96] Berger found one reference to an 11-year old boy reading 123,000 W.P.M.[97] At that rate he could read Gone With the Wind in less than five minutes if the pages could be turned fast enough. Woody Allen with a subtle reference to the Evelyn Wood technique is quoted as saying: "I took a course in speed reading, learning to read straight down the middle of the page, and I was able to go through War and Peace in 20 minutes. It's about Russia."[98]

Critics of a speed reading technique for study behavior are probably no more outspoken than Walter Pauk. He argues that speed reading is an inefficient if not disastrous technique to use in studying.[99] Lisa S. Fleisher, Joseph R. Jenkins, and Darlene Pany present evidence using poor readers which indicates comprehension does not increase when decoding speed increases.[100]

In 1968 Samuel Weintraub and Earl Hanson published an excellent review of 24 speed reading studies going back to 1884.[101]

They emphasize that rates of reading are influenced by many factors, some may still be unknown. "It appears that physiological, phychological, intellectual, as well as factors outside the reader, may all be involved in affecting an individual's ability to read rapidly."[102]

The decade of the '70s had relatively moderate expectations from speed reading compared to the 1960s. These selected studies from the 1970s reflect this moderate trend:

1) Gladys B. Moore, "To Buy or Not to Buy" (1970) Journal of Reading.[103]

2) Melvin Howards, "Strategies for Improving Our Concepts and Techniques in Regard to Speed Reading." (1970) International Reading Association Conference.[104]

3) Angela M. Labmeier and Edward L. Vockell, "Effects and Correlates of a Course in Speed Reading." (1971) ERIC.[105]

4) Florence Schale, "Measuring Degree and Rate of Visual Awareness in Rapid Reading on Television." (1971) National Reading Conference.[106]

5) Ronald P. Carver, "Speed Readers Don't Read; They Skim." (1972) Psychology Today. This article is a strong rebuke of Evelyn Wood's Reading Dynamics course. Carver says that speed reading is about

five percent sense and 95 percent nonsense.[107]

6) Eleanor J. Gibson and Harry Levin, The Psychology of Reading (1975). There is an excellent section on rapid reading (pp. 539-49) that includes an analysis of Evelyn Wood's Reading Dynamics program. Several good studies are identified and explained.[108]

7) Mark D. Jackson and James L. McClelland, "Sensory and Cognitive Determinants of Reading Speed." (1975) Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior.[109]

8) Brenda Gloembesky Smith, "Speed Reading Scores in Perspective." (1975) Journal of Reading. This brief article provides insight into some variables that can affect reading rate.[110]

9) James I. Brown, "Efficient Reading Courses for College Students." (1976) International Reading Association Conference.[111]

10) Leonard R. Mendelsohn, "Jetting to Utopia: The Speed Reading Phenomenon." (1977) Language Arts.[112]

11) Karen Steiner, "Speed Reading Revisited." (1978) Journal of Reading. Steiner believes flexibility or adaptability is a principle that can help educators fit speed reading into a realistic perspective.[113]

A healthy but not universal skepticism of speed reading techniques prevailed in the 1970s. Richard G. Graf writing in 1973 for Psychology Today said the merchants of speed reading have exaggerated their powers.[114] "The claim that most of us can increase our reading speed dramatically without loss of comprehension remains unsupported," according to Graf.[115]

The first half of the 1980s have not produced many speed reading articles within the professional literature. However, the topic of speed reading and Evelyn Wood's technique continue to be discussed after nearly 25 years of heated debate. In 1982 A. Garr Cranney along with Bruce L. Brown, Dorothy M. Hansen and Dillon K. Inouye (all associated with Brigham Young University) published "Rate and Reading Dynamics Reconsidered."[116] This article is a light but unmistakable testimonial for some of Evelyn Wood's methods. The authors close by saying, "We hope rate research will continue. The answers to questions some of us have thought settled for many years may need reconsideration."[117]

Indeed rate of reading research continues. This summer (1985) Ronald P. Carver, a veteran critic of speed reading techniques, published a most impressive research paper titled, "How Good Are Some Of The World's Best Readers?"[118] Reading rate and comprehension of superior readers were investigated. The superior readers were grouped as: speed readers, professionals, college students, and people who score exceptionally high on tests. Carver found that, "Speed readers seem to be quite similar in ability to other superior readers except that they typically choose to skim at rates higher than 1,000 words per minute and

accept the lowered comprehension that accompanies skimming."[119] Carver states when speed readers do what is called speed reading, they are skimming. Furthermore, he says researchers and practitioners must consider the likelihood that a hoax is being perpetuated when it is suggested that a person can be trained to read at 1,000 W.P.M. or higher.[120]

Summary

As research with rapid reading concepts progressed, starting with early eye movement studies in the 1930s and '40s, there was a faint, parallel interest growing within educational circles to develop speed reading techniques. This speed reading interest was at its zenith during the 1960s when Evelyn Wood's new techniques were frantically embraced by the lay public as well as many professionals. In the early 1960s Wood was visiting as many as a dozen campuses each week and consulted with many influential groups to include the United States Air Force Academy. Her self-confident, evangelistic approach and unusual claims were focal points for speed reading debates within the academic community. Critics of Evelyn Wood usually focus on insufficient research data to support her methods and claims.

When the 1960s welcomed speed reading techniques with its promise of increased efficiency and productivity, there were great expectations. But the expectations faded. Some social historians have compared the '60s to the '20s characterizing both decades as frivolous and reckless. The 1920s had flagpole sitters and marathon dancers while the 1960s had go-go dancers and speed readers going at 120,000 W.P.M. The roaring '20s and the speed reading '60s do have a few things in common. Both

eras were quite dynamic and overwhelming. Eric Hoffer while observing and studying the 1960s said, "If one were to pick the chief trait which characterizes the temper of our time it would be impatience."[121]

Jose' Ortega Y Gasset, one of Europe's greatest writers, said, "The most salient characteristic of life is its coerciveness: it is always urgent, 'here and now' without any possible postponement. Life is fired at us point-blank."[122] So we must do our best. For reading professionals, responsible for future generations of citizens, this means we should make an effort to understand significant research evidence.

In the case of speed reading, we have an opportunity to learn from previous scholars in order to make applications. Understanding the relationships and associated complications between speed and comprehension is most important. Flexibility or knowing when to scan and skim also ranks as a high priority. Speed reading definitions will always be dependent on such key variables as: physiological limits, environmental conditions (internal and external), and problems of measurement (methodological problems).

Research efforts often broaden our understanding when meandering ideas are fired at us point-blank. As professional educators our careers will have a better chance to thrive, provided our knowledge base remains vibrant.

NOTES

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2. Ibid.

3. Louis L. Snyder, The Age Of Reason (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1955).

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5. Wyn Craig Wade, The Titanic (New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

6. Witold Rybczynski, Taming the Tiger: The Struggle To Control Technology (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

7. Tom Lehrer, "So Long, Mom" written in 1965 and found in In a Dark Time edited by Robert Jay Lifton and Nicholas Humphrey (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984) pp. 55-6.

8. Allen Berger, "Questions Asked About Speed Reading." The Clearing House, 44 (5) January 1970, pp. 272-78.

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